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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses expressive writing and the expressive mode, which is seen as a recurring stage in a writer's process of writing. The digest suggests that by structuring expressive writing activities and correlating them with particular stages of the writing process, a teacher can draw the natural linguistic activity out of a student. The digest advocates using journal writing as a stimulus for various stages in the creative process and presents several class exercises and assignments in journal writing which can help develop the students' expressive writing abilities. The digest concludes by offering three general principles for teachers to keep in mind while they are guiding students through the recursive stages of the writing process with the use of expressive writing activities. Contains 10 references. (NKA)

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Teaching Expressive Writing

by Gary R. Cobine

This *Digest* discusses the personal essay form, an exemplar of what James Britton calls "expressive writing."

When to Teach Expressive Writing

Controversy has arisen about the age at which the expressive mode originates and, therefore, about the age at which it should be taught in school. According to Britton (1970) the expressive mode precedes the persuasive and informative modes in a writer's linguistic development. The implication is that expressive writing be taught first, in elementary school. According to another theory, however, the persuasive mode, growing out of the "regulative language" that children learn from their environment, precedes the expressive mode in children's linguistic development (Newkirk, 1984).

Neither theory seems entirely accurate. Authors of great literature, for example, who are obviously consummating, not beginning, their linguistic development, write through a powerful expressive mode. At the same time, authors of dynamic journalistic and scholarly reports, who are also consummating their linguistic development, write through powerful critical, persuasive, and informative modes. The apparent contradiction between theories is resolved if the various modes of writing are seen to be equally available to all writers at all ages rather than hierarchically arranged in tiers by age and talent. In other words, journalists and scholars use the expressive mode as much as literary artists, even though they de-emphasize expressiveness in their product. In this view, the expressive mode is seen to be related not so much to a linguistic stage in a writer's development as to a recurring stage in a writer's process of writing.

The Expressive Mode in the Writing Process

The expressive mode fits not only into the expression stage of a writer's process, but also into almost every other stage. As a writer confronts a topic, collects and recollects material, puts material into incipient forms, recognizes patterns of ideas and details, and reworks the material in various ways, the writer's expository modes are complemented and invigorated by the expressive mode, like a linguistic ebb and flow of creative power. Gordon Pradl (1990) wrote of James Britton's championing of expressive writing in education: "Making knowledge personal requires language that is infused with one's own attitudes, connections, revelations. Thus 'expressive' is not a melody of idiosyncrasy, but a harmony of connection." By structuring expressive writing activities and correlating them with particular stages of the writing process, a teacher can draw this natural linguistic activity out of a student writer.

Walshe (1987) characterizes recursive stages in the writer's creative process as: problem, investigation, expression, insight, announcement, reaction, and refinement.

Journal writing can be used as a stimulus for various stages of the creative process; it can be used especially well for the problem stage, when students explore through private, exploratory, unedited writing, their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Connors, 1988). In these journals, sometimes called "think books," they contemplate, make connections, and ask questions. As they do so, the teacher helps them to satisfy 3 purposes: to explore potential topics, to write expressively about these topics, and to recognize potential material about these topics. First, by keeping an ongoing record of their thoughts, students gather the seeds for topics of special interest. Second, by writing expressively, they nourish the seeds–their language becomes more lyrical and metaphorical (Craig, 1983). Third, by perusing their journals periodically, they harvest: Not only among their thoughts do potential topics emerge, but also in their metaphors hidden knowledge emerges, like a surprising revelation in a dream.

Journal use can be structured into a cohesive series of activities (Connors, 1988). In an assignment activity, to evoke expressive writing among students who may be leery about "self expression" and to set boundaries to the wide range of expressive-writing possibilities (Collins, 1985), the teacher makes a specific journal-writing assignment. The teacher suggests an exploratory topic for the day via a "focus

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question" (Craig, 1983). For example, the teacher could start the students on an exploration of a personally significant aspect of their own life or a friend or relative's life. Or, the teacher could start the students on an imaginary dialogue with a personally significant figure, real or fictitious, such as someone they consider wise, heroic, admirable, or enviable. Then the students write a journal entry in class, and, if inspired, add to the entry outside of class. At this point, the teacher neither reads nor marks the entries, staying with the purpose of eliciting, not evaluating, expressive writing. Furthermore, the teacher stresses to the students that they, too, withhold judgment in order to write spontaneously and open-mindedly.

In a "selection activity," in which students enter an investigation stage of the creative process after accumulating numerous journal entries, the teacher calls for a selection of one entry for public uses. The students read their selection aloud while their classmates listen silently. Then, in a "revision activity," in which students enter expression and insight stages, the teacher calls for a revision of the selection with regard to audience and purpose so that the students begin to shift from an expressive mode towards an expository mode (Connors, 1988). The students write a characterization of their audience--age range, principal occupation, political affiliation, religious orientation, social memberships, etc.--and a definition of their purpose--to persuade, to explain, to evaluate, etc.--with respect to their audience. Then they revise and rewrite their selection with their audience and purpose in mind.

In a "scrutiny activity," in which students enter announcement and reaction stages, they distribute copies of their formal drafts to classmates, having established their purpose for writing. The teacher collects and marks the formal paper, especially noting how identifiable the student-writer's audience is, and how consistent and effective his or her purpose is with respect to the audience.

Other activities can be used to reinforce the 4-part journal writing activity. Brainstorming, for example can be used as an additional stimulus for the investigation stage of writing. Freewriting can be used as a stimulus for the expression form of writing. "Focused freewriting" is an especially adaptable activity because the teacher can use it on a case-by-case, moment-to-moment basis, whenever students seem directionless, whether at the beginning, in the middle, or towards the end of their work on an assignment (Tompkins and Camp, 1988). The students write continuously, pen-to-paper, for 5 to 10 minutes, starting with their topic, but associating freely in all directions. If tempted to backtrack, pause, or stop, they rewrite a personal code-word over and over until a new direction comes to them spontaneously.

Heilker (1996) uses a modified freewriting exercise with his college students in an essay-writing class–after the students have decided on their topics, he has them do some initial, "baseline," directed freewriting in class. He asks them to freewrite for 5 minutes in response to a prompt: "At this point, what do you know about your issue? How do you feel about it? What do you want to know about it?"

Summary

When making an assignment, the teacher who guides students through the recursive stages of the writing process with the use of expressive-writing activities (whether it be in journal writing or in essay writing) should remember 3 general principles: (1) allow students a choice of topic, at least within certain parameters; (2) require students to articulate their rhetorical purpose at some point; and (3) establish an "expressive relationship" with students so that they come to use the expressive mode naturally to enhance their writing ability. Students can gain clarity by writing statements of belief and meaning; they can develop their linguistic ability by writing expressively; and in using language purposefully, they can come to use language respectfully. As one instructor has written: "When we encounter traces of egocentric language in speech or in writing we may view those traces as the most powerful sources for knowledge-making in our classes and in our students' writing" (Grunst, 1991).

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